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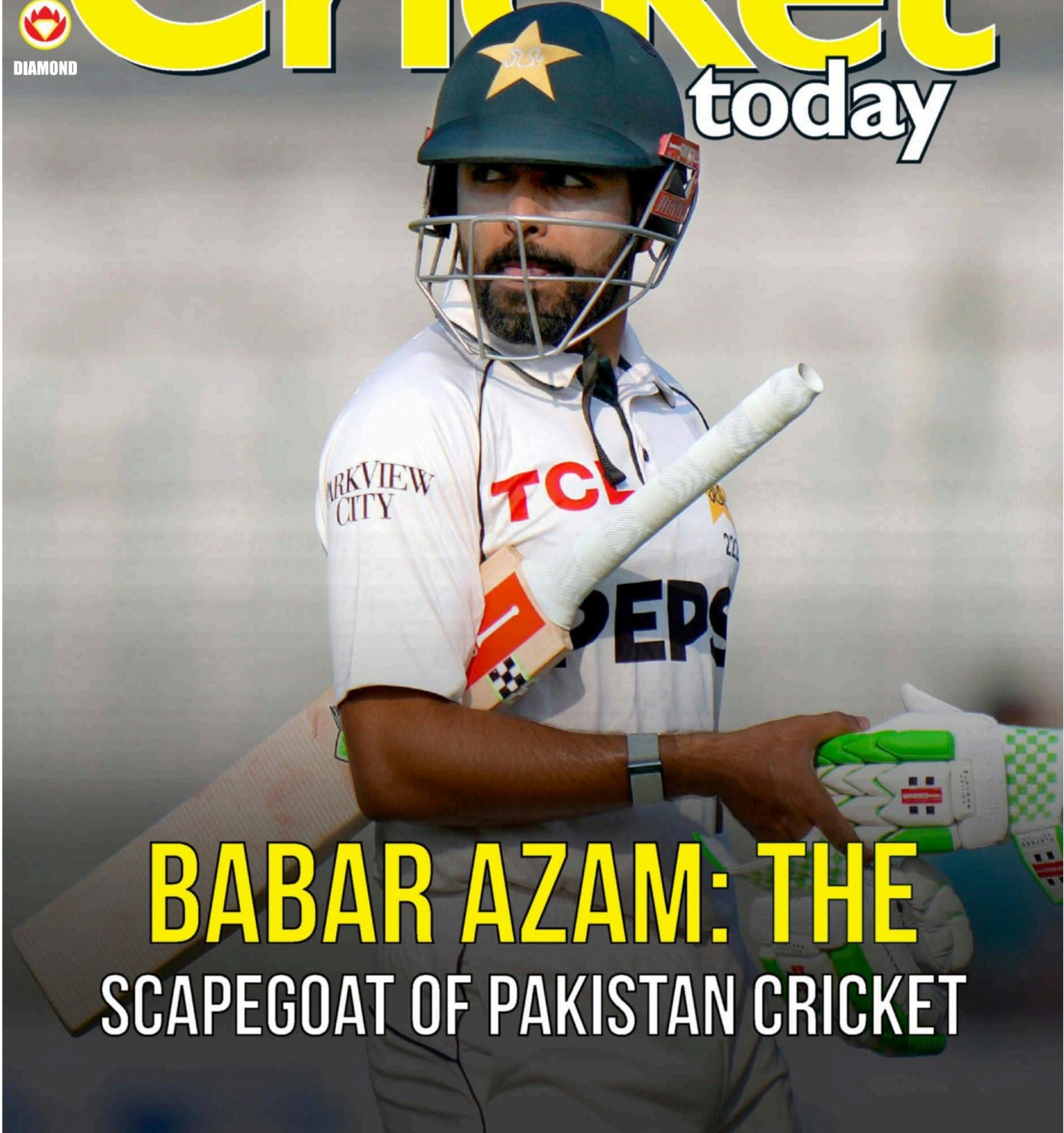

BABAR AZAM: THE SCAPEGOAT OF PAKISTAN CRICKET

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

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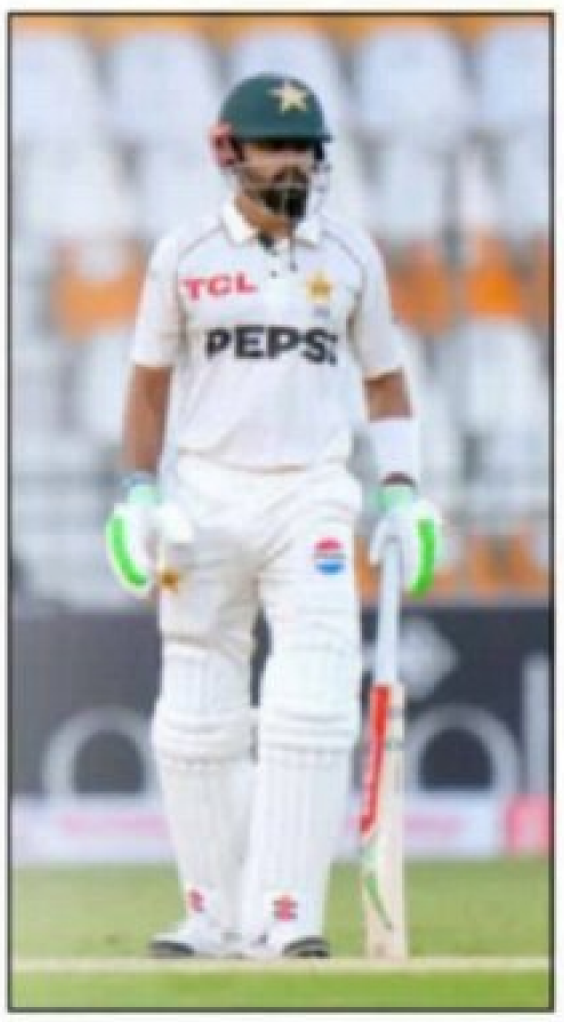
Babar Azam was made the scapegoat for Pakistan's poor international cricket performance. The veteran was dropped from the Test team after England won the first game by an innings and 47 runs. However, the team management revealed a different story altogether. According to assistant coach Azhar Mahmood, Babar wanted to continue playing in the test series against England but has been rested for the two remaining matches. Fast bowlers Shaheen Shah Afridi and Naseem Shah were also left out. Babar failed to score a half-century in his last 18 test innings, with the highest score of 41 against Australia in Melbourne last year. Except for Babar, Pakistan kept faith in the batting line-up that scored 556 and 220 in the first test. However, the decision to leave out Babar and other players proved beneficial for Pakistan as the home team defeated England in the second Test. The win was the first for captain Shan Masood, who lost six tests in a row since being elevated as red-ball skipper last year. It also ended Pakistan's winless 11-match home run that included four losses against England. Pakistan's previous home test win came against South Africa in early 2021. Besides losing to England, it also lost home tests to Australia and recently lost 2-0 to Bangladesh. Meanwhile, there was good news for Chennai Super Kings and MS Dhoni. What has genuinely captured attention this time, though, isn't just Dhoni's decision to continue playing but the significant changes to the IPL auction rules that seem to have been custom-tailored to extend his already legendary career. The most controversial of these rule changes is the reintroduction of the "Uncapped Player Rule," specifically the part that allows players who haven't played international cricket in over five years to be considered "uncapped." Naturally, this rule has sparked heated debates. The timing of this rule change has led many to question the motivations behind it. On the one hand, some see it as a strategic masterstroke by the BCCI, designed to help teams balance their rosters and retain fan-favorite players without breaking the bank. Others, however, view it as a manipulation of the rules with the singular goal of ensuring that MS Dhoni continues to play in the IPL. From a purely sporting perspective, Dhoni is still a valuable asset. Despite being in the twilight of his career, he remains a crucial figure for CSK, both as a leader and a mentor for younger players. His on-field presence, tactical acumen, and ability to finish games have made him a legend in the shortest format of the game. Enjoy the action-packed edition of Cricket Today.



Babar Azam was made the scapegoat for Pakistan's poor international cricket performance.

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SENSATIONAL HUNDRED: Ben Duckett kisses his helmet after scoring a century during the second day of the second test cricket match between Pakistan and England.

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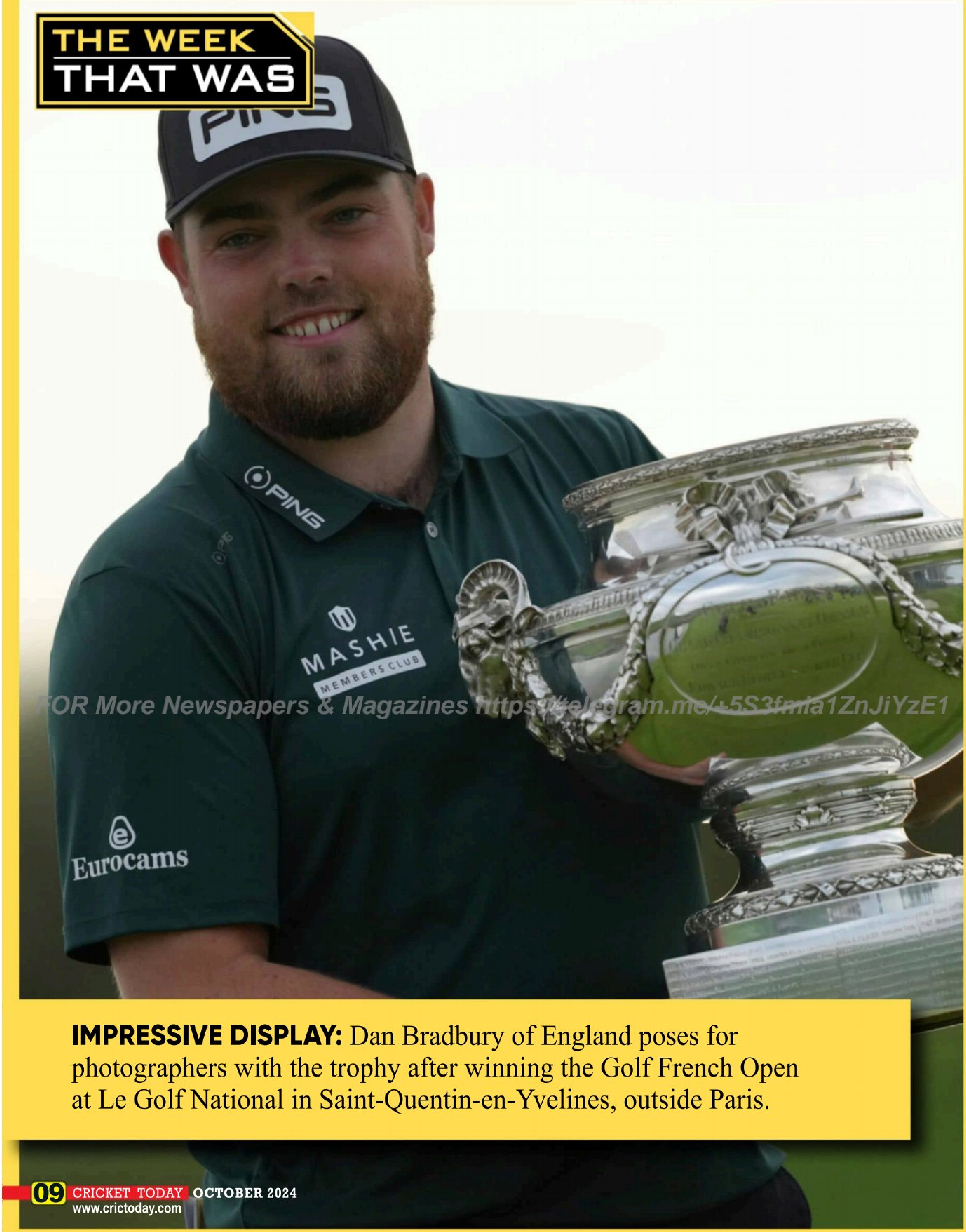
NEW STAR OF PAKISTAN: Kamran Ghulam celebrates after scoring a century during the first day of the second test cricket match against England.

CELEBRATION TIME: Mexico's Andrés Guardado is thrown in the air by his teammates after an international friendly soccer match against the United States at Akron Stadium in Guadalajara. Mexico won 2-0.

DOMINATING PERFORMANCE: lJannik Sinner of Italy celebrates with his trophy after defeating Novak Djokovic of Serbia in the men's singles finals match for the Shanghai Masters tennis tournament at Qizhong Forest Sports City Tennis Center in Shanghai.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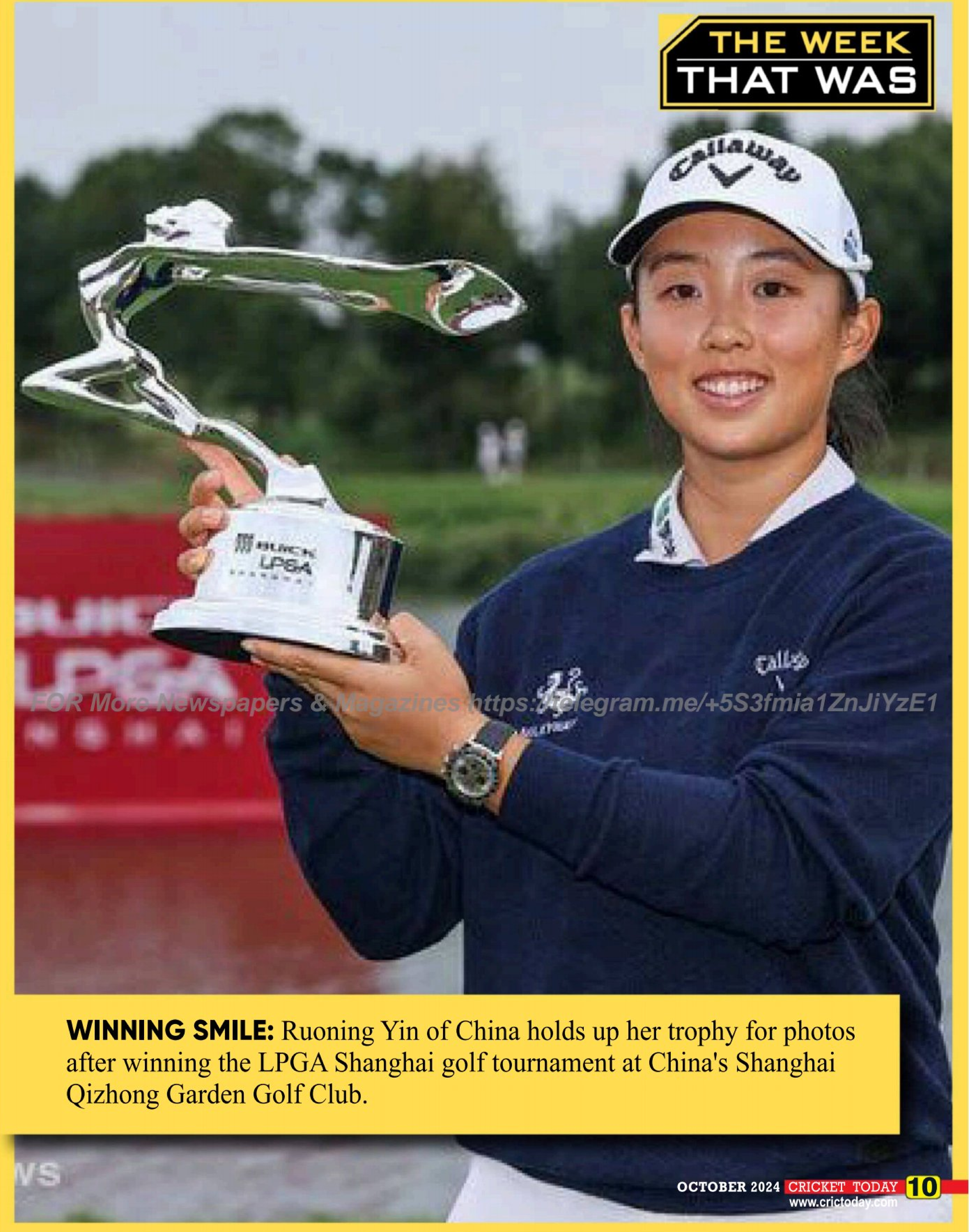
IMPRESSIVE DISPLAY: Dan Bradbury of England poses for photographers with the trophy after winning the Golf French Open at Le Golf National in Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, outside Paris.



WINNING SMILE: Ruoning Yin of China holds up her trophy for photos after winning the LPGA Shanghai golf tournament at China's Shanghai Qizhong Garden Golf Club.

Cricket Buzz

EXIDE
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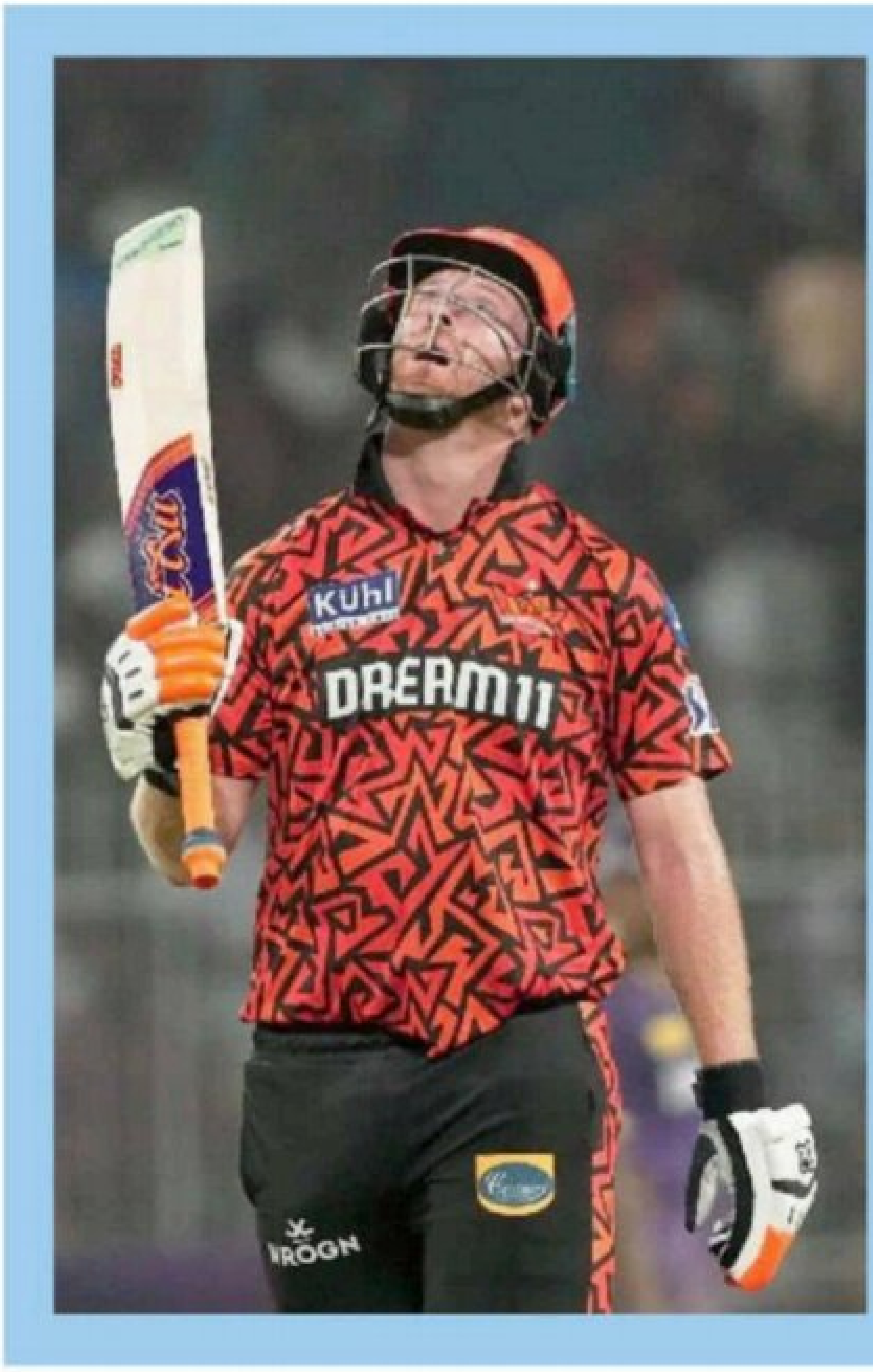
"Virat Kohli doesn't play for records but to win matches"

- Mike Hesson sends warning to Australia

"Thinking of taking them to Australia for the Border-Gavaskar Trophy"

- Rohit Sharma on Mayank Yadav and other reserve pacers



SRH TO RETAIN SOUTH AFRICA BATTER FOR INR 23 CRORE

Sunrisers Hyderabad, last season's finalists, are ready to make a big move regarding the retention of the players. SRH will surpass the mandated retention slabs set by the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) ahead of the IPL 2025 mega auction. According to a report by ESPNCricinfo, the Orange Army will pay INR 23 crore to South African star Heinrich Klaasen, who will be their first retention. Pat Cummins, who was bought for INR 20.50 crore in the 17th season, will take a 13.80 pat cut and will be retained for INR 18 crore. Abhishek Sharma will get INR 14 crore from the 2016 champions.

PCB GIVES NEW OPTION TO BCCI

According to Cricbuzz, the PCB has written a letter to the BCCI offering assistance should the Rohit Sharma-led team want to return to Delhi or Chandigarh after playing every game in Pakistan. This would help India to avoid staying in Pakistan due to security concerns. A PCB official revealed that there is nearly a week's gap between the last two matches. The Champions Trophy will be played from February 19 to March 9 in Lahore, Rawalpindi, and Karachi. The PCB would host the India National Cricket Team's matches in Lahore. India's matches are scheduled for February 20 (vs. Bangladesh), February 23 (vs. Pakistan), and March 2 (vs. New Zealand). The PCB and ICC are also ready to organize India's matches outside Pakistan if the Men in Blue refuse to travel.

ANIL KUMBLE HAILS YOUNG STAR

Former Indian cricketer Anil Kumble feels that Yashasvi Jaiswal should continue playing aggressive cricket during the Test series against Australia. He mentioned that the southpaw would feel confident knowing that India has won two consecutive Test series in Australia. "I don't think he will change his approach. Although he is touring Australia for the first time, he will know that India have won the previous two red-ball series Down Under. This will boost his confidence," Kumble told Jio Cinema. Jaiswal has shown his hunger for runs in the most extended format of the game. "He has the technique and hunger to succeed in Australia. He has the game to take on the Aussie bowlers."

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ASHWIN REVEALS HIS TOP RETENTION PICKS

India National Cricket Team's off-spinner Ravichandran Ashwin has said that he wouldn't retain MS Dhoni as an uncapped player for IPL 2025 despite Chennai Super Kings (CSK) having the option to do so. Ashwin mentioned that he would instead pick the legendary wicket-keeper as a capped player along with captain Ruturaj Gaikwad, Ravindra Jadeja, Shivam Dube, and Matheesha Pathirana. The BCCI brought back the scrapped rule, which allows the franchises to retain Indian players as uncapped players who haven't played international cricket for five years or don't have central contracts. Dhoni last played for the Men in Blue in July 2019. Former players and fans felt that this rule was reintroduced to allow MS Dhoni to play another season in the cash-rich league.

JADEJA'S NET WORTH SURPASSES VIRAT'S

Former India National Cricket Team player Ajay Jadeja has a net worth of INR 1450 crore, and the veteran has surpassed Virat Kohli on the list of wealthiest cricketers from the Asian Country. According to media reports, Jadeja's net worth increased after he was named the heir to the Jamnagar Royal Throne. Kohli's net worth is INR 1000 crore. The Maharaja Jamsaheb of Nawanahar announced Ajay Jadeja as heir to the Jamnagar Royal Throne on October 12. Indian cricketers have a deep connection with Jamnagar. KS Ranjitsinhji and KS Duleepsinhji, on whose names Ranji Trophy and Duleep Trophy are played, have connected with Ajay Jadeja. Jadeja played 196 ODIs for the Men in Blue, scoring 5359 runs at 37.47, with the help of six hundred and 30 half-centuries.

MS DHONI SET TO PLAY ANOTHER IPL SEASON IN 2025: A MASTERSTROKE OR A RULE-BENDING MOVE BY BCCI?

MS Dhoni last played for India during the 2019 ICC Cricket World Cup; few could have predicted that we would still be discussing his participation in the Indian Premier League (IPL) more than five years later. Yet, here we are in 2025...

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

When MS Dhoni last played for India during the 2019 ICC Cricket World Cup, few could have predicted that we would still be discussing his participation in the Indian Premier League (IPL) more than five years later. Yet, here we are in 2025, with the "Captain Cool" gearing up to play another season for the Chennai Super Kings (CSK), and once again, the world is buzzing with excitement.

What has genuinely captured attention this time, though, isn't just Dhoni's decision to continue playing but the significant changes to the IPL auction rules that seem to have been custom-tailored to extend his already legendary career. The most controversial of these rule changes is the reintroduction of the "Uncapped Player Rule," specifically the part that allows players who haven't played international cricket in over five years to be considered "uncapped." Naturally, this rule has sparked heated debates, with many cricket fans and analysts arguing that it appears

to be a strategic move by the BCCI to allow CSK to retain Dhoni at a discounted price.

So, has the BCCI bent the rules just for MS Dhoni? Or is this a well-intentioned move to promote domestic talent and help franchises manage their squads better?

THE UNCAPPED PLAYER RULE: A CLOSER LOOK

To fully grasp the controversy, it's important to understand the details of the reintroduced "Uncapped Player Rule." Initially introduced in 2008, during the inception of the IPL, the uncapped player regulation allowed franchises to retain domestic talent who hadn't yet made their mark on the international stage. This was done at a reduced price compared to capped international stars, allowing franchises to build squads without overspending on marquee players. The rule was discontinued in 2021 as the league grew in stature and more international players made their way into the IPL.

Now, ahead of the 2025 season, the IPL governing council has brought the rule back but with a twist. Under this revised rule, any Indian player who hasn't played international cricket (whether it's Tests, ODIs,

or T20Is) for over five years is considered “uncapped.” What this means is that franchises can retain such players at a significantly reduced cost of ₹4 crore (approximately USD 500,000), which is much lower than what top-tier players usually command in the auction.

Here’s the kicker: MS Dhoni hasn’t played for India since the 2019 World Cup, meaning that he qualifies as an uncapped player under this rule. Chennai Super Kings, the franchise with which Dhoni has been synonymous since the start of the IPL, can retain their talisman at this reduced price, freeing up funds for other high-value acquisitions in the 2025 mega auction.

BCCI'S MASTERSTROKE OR MANIPULATION?

The timing of this rule change has led many to question the motivations behind it. On the one hand, some see it as a strategic masterstroke by the BCCI, designed to help teams balance their rosters and retain fan-favorite players without breaking the bank. Others, however, view it as a manipulation of the rules with the singular goal of ensuring that MS Dhoni continues to play in the IPL. From a purely sporting perspective, Dhoni is still a valuable asset. Despite being in the twilight of his career, he remains a crucial figure for CSK, both as a leader and a mentor for younger players. His on-field presence, tactical acumen, and ability to finish games have made him a legend in the shortest format of the game. But beyond his cricketing skills, Dhoni is also a commercial juggernaut. He is the face of CSK, and his massive fan following continues to generate revenues in terms of merchandise sales, sponsorships, and media attention. Losing Dhoni could have significant financial ramifications for the IPL as well as for CSK. This brings us to the core of the controversy: Is the reintroduction of this specific uncapped player rule a legitimate move to keep one of cricket’s biggest stars in the league, or is it a convenient workaround to retain a franchise's most valuable asset?

ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR OF THE RULE

Supporters of the rule change argue that it isn't about Dhoni alone. The rule benefits many domestic players who have fallen out of favor with the national selectors but are still valuable in the IPL ecosystem. Players like Suresh Raina, Robin Uthappa, and Harbhajan Singh have been in similar positions before, and the IPL has often provided them a platform to shine despite no longer being in the reckoning for India. Additionally, this rule change gives franchises more flexibility in building their squads. With mega auctions set to take place ahead of the 2025 season, teams can now retain experienced, out-of-favor players without committing too much of their budget. In a league where salary caps are a constant balancing act, this is a valuable advantage. The rule can also be seen as a way to reward loyalty. Over the years, players like Dhoni have become synonymous with their IPL franchises, building deep connections with the fans. Allowing these players to continue playing, even as they edge towards the end of their careers, adds an emotional dimension to the tournament, keeping fan engagement high.

CRITICISM AND CONTROVERSY

Of course, not everyone is on board with the BCCI's decision. Critics argue that the rule is too specific and conveniently benefits only a handful of players, with Dhoni being the most obvious beneficiary. By classifying Dhoni as an "uncapped" player, the BCCI is bending the rules to favor CSK, a franchise that has already been immensely successful in the IPL, having won multiple titles. Some believe this creates an uneven playing field, allowing CSK to retain Dhoni at a bargain price while other franchises may have to pay more for similarly talented players.

Furthermore, the idea of Dhoni being classified as

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“uncapped” feels disingenuous to many. After all, he is one of India’s most celebrated cricketers, having captained the national team to numerous victories, including the 2007 T20 World Cup and the 2011 Cricket World Cup. To label him as "uncapped" simply because he hasn’t played international cricket in recent years feels like a manipulation of the spirit of the game.

THE BROADER IMPLICATIONS FOR IPL 2025

As the 2025 season approaches, all eyes will be on the mega auction and how teams navigate the new rules. While the "Uncapped Player Rule" has certainly stirred controversy, its broader impact remains to be seen. If Dhoni continues to perform at a high level and CSK benefits from retaining him, the BCCI will likely feel vindicated. However, if the rule is seen as favoritism and hampers the competitiveness of the league, it could lead to a backlash from fans and other franchises alike. **One thing is sure:** MS Dhoni’s presence in IPL 2025 will keep the excitement levels high. Whether or not the rule was designed with him in mind, his return for another season will undoubtedly add another chapter to his already storied IPL career.

The BCCI’s reintroduction of the "Uncapped Player Rule" has raised eyebrows, mainly because of its timing and the benefits it offers to players like MS Dhoni. While some view it as a savvy move to retain aging stars and maintain fan engagement, others see it as an unnecessary bending of the rules to accommodate one of cricket’s biggest icons. Regardless of where one stands on the issue, the IPL 2025 season promises to be one of the most exciting yet, with Dhoni’s presence ensuring that the drama—both on and off the field—will continue. ■

FEATURE

5 REASONS WHY DROPPING BABAR AZAM AGAINST ENGLAND MAKES NO SENSE

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To have someone like Babar Azam removed from the Test unit is akin to removing the leading actor from a proper big-budget potboiler just days before the shooting is to begin. For the past half a decade, if there is a batsman...

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

Ahead of the second test against England, Pakistan will sport a rather dramatically l different side. The reason? The opening Test match at Multan resulted in a heavy defeat for the hosts. One that yielded an inning loss. It's never easy to digest. Right? But truth be told, just as big a disappointment as that loss is Pakistan's disappointing decision to ax Babar Azam from the squad. That is right. One of Pakistan's foremost batters will no longer feature in the Test lineup. The most dominant question in the realm of international Test cricket is whether Pakistan made the right call or hammered upon themselves a self-inflicted blow.

At CricToday, we think it is the latter. Here are 5 reasons that seem to point in that very direction. Take a look:

BABAR AZAM IS THE BACKBONE OF PAKISTAN'S BATTING UNIT

To have someone like Babar Azam removed from the Test unit is akin to removing the main actor from a proper big-budget potboiler just days before the shooting is to begin. For the past half a decade, if there is a batsman from the Pakistan men's national cricket team who's been able to rub shoulders with some of the world's leading batters, including Kohli and Root, then it is Babar Azam. For sure, there's much that he still needs to do in order to strengthen his game at the five-day level further. But Babar's inherent hunger for runs and ability to do the bulk of his team's scoring on

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more occasions than none have heightened his career and status as among the world's premier batters. Together with the likes of Mohammad Rizwan and Azhar Ali, Babar Azam formed an important troika of Pakistan's lineup that so often relies on the bowlers to do good work in Tests. Hence, the onus of batsmanship relied heavily on the right-hander. What is the team going to achieve by dropping a highly talented lad?

IS HE ACTUALLY GOING THROUGH A LEAN PATCH?

There's been a growing concern regarding Babar Azam currently undergoing a lean patch, and this has been rather prolonged in his recent playing career than most would know. But while it is absolutely true and driven by facts that Babar didn't have even close to a good 2023 when it comes to Test cricket, his numbers prior to that have been rather telling. Last year, he scored just 204 runs from 9 innings (5 Tests), but Babar Azam had a rather prolific 2022 playing Test cricket for Pakistan. So the question is, what did one of Pakistan's most widely regarded batters achieve that year? Scoring no fewer than 1184 from just 9 Test matches (17 innings), Babar Azam commanded respect and plaudits, both of which he seems to have lost. What he desperately needs at the moment is some faith and backing. It's not always possible for a batter to score dollops of runs at a Test average of 69, which the former Pak skipper achieved back in that year. So Pakistan need to address the elephant in the room: Are Babar Azam's ordinary numbers just indicative of a current lean patch or is it actually a problem that has persisted for long?

HIS NUMBERS AT HOME ARE IMPRESSIVE

Let us dive into something that is both fascinating and beckons more attention than given: 16 Tests, 1590 runs, 6 centuries, and 7 fifties at an average of 58 at home! These are Babar Azam's figures while playing Tests at home in Pakistan. So while his average away from Pakistan's home turf is 37, Babar Azam even has a better strike rate on home turf: 58. As a matter of fact, his personal best score of 196 in Test match

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cricket has come at home in Pakistan. Truth be told, the right-hander is more at home where he holds on an end on Pakistani pitches than one would note. His ability to stay at the wicket and produce useful runs has for long held his team in good stead.

No random-speak this.

Babar Azam has been dismissed for a duck on only one occasion from 29 innings in home conditions. He's a great of the game. That is for sure. It is an undisputed fact, and one hopes that a player of his stature is utilized well instead of being slider onto a quiet corner.

SOMEONE WITH BABAR'S EXPERIENCE IS NEEDED WHEN PAKISTAN ARE UNDERGOING A TRANSITION

The current Pakistani unit are clearly undergoing a period of transformation. It's a period whose best days, it could be argued, are still in the future for the present team under Shan Masood, which doesn't seem to be blooming all that well. So how is that? Pakistan's Test unit has lost each of the 6 Test matches that it has played ever since Shan Masood took over as captain. This is where it becomes very important for the Kuwait-born cricketing captain to realize the importance brought to the team by someone like Babar Azam, an old guard of the team. More importantly, as Pakistan are recalibrating its approach, the national team needs players who've captained before and made runs under pressure.

ONE FAILURE IN A TEST DOESN'T LEAD TO BEING DROPPED

Quite frankly, it's impractical. It's quite a hard call that may surely have made Babar Azam crestfallen with disappointment. Harsh even! His most recent Test scores read- 30 off 71 and 5 off 15 deliveries against England. Surely, he flopped. But what is the guarantee that he may not have produced the results when his team desperately needed their best to stand up, especially at the back of a heartbreaking loss that Multan that culminated into an inning defeat for the hosts? ■

BEN STOKES: THE COMEBACK MAN OF ENGLAND CRICKET

Stokes, who played match-winning innings for England in the finals of the 50-over World Cup in 2019 and the T20 World Cup in 2022, came out of ODI retirement to feature in last year's dismal World Cup defense. After knee surgery over the winter, he opted out of the...

BY STAFF WRITER

Ben Stokes' white-ball career might not be over just yet. The England cricket great said he would be open to playing again for the ODI and T20 teams following the decision to put Brendon McCullum in charge of the limited-overs set-up as well as the test side. “If I get the call saying, ‘Do you want to come and play?’ — it’s definitely going to be a ‘yes,’” Stokes, England's test captain, said in an interview with British broadcaster Sky Sports.

Stokes, who played match-winning innings for England in the finals of the 50-over World Cup in 2019 and the T20 World Cup in 2022, came out of ODI retirement to feature in last year’s dismal World Cup defense. After knee surgery over the winter, he opted out of the T20 World Cup in June — which saw England reach the semifinals — to concentrate on his fitness.

England has launched a reboot of its white-ball teams to attract the country's next generation, and Stokes said he would be happy to watch the youngsters take center stage if that's what McCullum preferred.

“This white-ball team has gone in a new direction," Stokes said. "We’ve seen some unbelievable talent come through — just to point out one, Jacob Bethell, who I think is going to be a superstar.

“I’ve played a lot of white-ball cricket for England, I’m very happy and content with what I’ve achieved in that form of the game. If I am part of the white-ball teams’ plans going forward in any way, shape or form then great ... But I’m not going to be too disappointed if I don’t because it means someone’s come in and doing really well. I can just sit back and watch everyone else go out and smack it.”

Stokes struck up a strong relationship with McCullum during the test set-up but said he hadn't yet spoken to the New Zealander about extending his limited-overs career. Instead, the focus has been on getting fit for the upcoming test tour of Pakistan.

“He’s just letting me concentrate on what I need to concentrate on, especially around the test team," Stokes said, “and when that time or conversation comes, then we’ll see.

“It’s nice," he added, "to have all three teams now with the same messages and the same philosophies towards playing cricket, even though they’re in different forms.” ■

PAKISTAN VS ENGLAND: 5 RECORDS ACHIEVED IN FIRST TEST

Root and Brook put on a partnership of 454 runs, the highest ever for England and the fourth highest in test history. The biggest remains 624 between Kumar Sangakkara and Mahela Jayawardene for Sri Lanka against South Africa in 2006...

BY STAFF WRITER

England set records and reached milestones in compiling an extraordinary 823-7 declared against Pakistan in Multan. **Here's a flavor of them:**

TOTAL SCORE

It was the fourth time a team scored more than 800 runs — and the first time this century. Only three totals have been bigger: Sri Lanka's 952-6 declared against India in 1997; England's 903-7 declared against Australia in 1938; and England's 849 all out against the West Indies in 1930

JOE ROOT

Joe Root became England's highest run-scorer in tests during his career-best knock of 262 as he surpassed Alastair Cook. He moved to fifth place on the

all-time list, behind only Sachin Tendulkar, Ricky Ponting, Jacques Kallis, and Rahul Dravid.

HARRY BROOK

Harry Brook outscored Root, hitting 317, which is tied for 20th in the list of highest individual scores in test cricket. He became the sixth Englishman to make a triple hundred and the first since Graham Gooch in 1990.

PARTNERSHIP

Root and Brook put on a partnership of 454 runs, the highest ever for England and the fourth highest in test history. The biggest remains 624 between Kumar Sangakkara and Mahela Jayawardene for Sri Lanka against South Africa in 2006.

BOWLING

Six Pakistan bowlers conceded more than 100 runs. It is just the second time that has happened in tests, after Zimbabwe against Sri Lanka in 2004.

JOE ROOT SCALES NEW HEIGHTS IN TEST CRICKET

Root, who is technically excellent and owns pretty much all the shots, overtook Cook's record of 33 test centuries by an England batter last month when he made hundreds in both innings against Sri Lanka at Lord's...

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

With an exquisite straight drive for four, Joe Root took another of Alastair Cook's records by becoming England's highest run-scorer in test cricket. Root surpassed the retired Cook's total of 12,472 runs by reaching 71 during England's first innings on Day 3 of the first test against Pakistan.

The 33-year-old Root moved to fifth place on the all-time list of test run-scorers, behind India's Sachin Tendulkar (15,921), Australia's Ricky Ponting (13,378), South Africa's Jacques Kallis (13,289) and India's Rahul Dravid (13,288). All four above Root are retired and within reach of a batter who said ahead of the tour to Pakistan: "I see myself playing test cricket for a lot longer."

"There are other geniuses who can play genius innings. But Root is a genius with consistency," said Cook, who was commentating on the match for BBC radio when his record was taken by Root.

Root, who is technically excellent and owns pretty much all the shots, overtook Cook's record of 33 test centuries by an England batter last month when he made hundreds in both innings against Sri Lanka at Lord's. On Wednesday, he went on to reach his 35th test hundred — and first in Pakistan — and lies sixth on the all-time list of century-makers. "I've never seen that hunger, determination, or relentlessness in anyone's batting, really," Cook said of Root. "He elegantly does that."

Ben Stokes, the England test captain who is sitting out the first match of the series because of injury, praised Root's character and achievement in a video released by the England and Wales Cricket Board.

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"The selflessness that he has is an incredible attribute for him," Stokes said. "He always puts the team first, and the fact that he's got so many runs is just a bonus for us. He's an incredible player. It's going to take a long, long time for someone to come in and break that record. Just a great bloke. And it's an unbelievable feat to score that many runs.

"But the non-selfishness that he possesses is one thing I think sets him above or sets him apart from anybody else who is going to play for England for a long time."

Root waved to his teammates soon after reaching the milestone before he raised his bat in acknowledgment. He shook hands with Stokes and bowling mentor James Anderson as he walked off the field during the lunch break, shortly after moving above Cook's total number of test runs.

Root is playing in his 147th test and came into the Pakistan series averaging more than 50, whereas Cook made 161 test appearances and batted in 291 innings, averaging 45.35. They are England's third and fourth most-capped players, behind now-retired fast bowlers Anderson and Stuart Broad.

Root has more runs against India than any other opposition — 2,846 in 30 tests. Next is Australia,

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against whom he has 2,428 in 34 tests, while his best average is against Sri Lanka at 62.54. Root was England's captain from 2017-22. He averaged 52.80 before the captaincy and 46.45 during it, and he has returned to his prior level since standing down.

The most prolific year of his test career was in 2021 when he scored 1,708 runs. He has passed 1,000 runs in a year five times. He has settled at No. 4 in England's batting order and demonstrated during the recent summer tests against the West Indies and Sri Lanka that he has slightly reined in the bold and occasionally reckless approach he and his England teammates adopted early in the so-called "Bazball" era under coach Brendon McCullum and captain Ben Stokes.

Those risky ramp shots and reverse scoops are mostly gone — though he still got himself out attempting one against the Sri Lankans at Lord's — and he is harder to dismiss for it.

Root's next big target is displacing Tendulkar — the "Little Master" — atop the all-time list, and injury permitting, he has a good chance of doing so.

"You could say Sachin is still the favorite, but just," Cook said. ■

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CRICKET UMPIRE ALEEM DAR TO QUIT

Aleem Dar will step down in 2025 after the Pakistan domestic season. The 56-year-old Dar served on the ICC elite panel of umpires from 2003 to 23. He is also on the Pakistan elite panel and is among four Pakistani umpires...

Specsavers
The Test Experts
Specsavers

BY STAFF WRITER

Three-time world cricket umpire of the year Aleem Dar will step down in 2025 after the Pakistan domestic season. The 56-year-old Dar served on the ICC elite panel of umpires from 2003 to 23. He is also on the Pakistan elite panel and is among four Pakistani umpires on the ICC international panel, making him eligible to officiate in one-day internationals and Twenty20s.

"All great journeys must eventually come to an end, and the time has come for me to focus fully on my social and charity work," Dar said on Friday. "My hospital project and other initiatives are very close to my heart and require my full devotion and attention." Dar played 17 first-class matches and 18 List A games from 1986-98 before he made his first-class umpiring debut in Pakistan's premier domestic competition, the Quaid-e-Azam Trophy, in 1999.

"Umpiring has been my life for nearly 25 years and I have cherished the privilege of officiating some of the most iconic matches involving the greatest players of this generation," Dar said. "Throughout my career, I've strived to uphold the highest standards of sportsmanship, and it has been an honor to work alongside some of the finest match officials in the world."

Dar said it was the right time to step down and give opportunities to other emerging umpires from Pakistan. "I will remain committed to mentoring and supporting the next generation of match officials and will always be available to offer guidance to those pursuing a career in this noble profession," he said. Dar officiated in 145 test matches, 231 ODIs, 72 T20s, and five T20 World Cups. ■

TOM LATHAM TAKES OVER AS NEW ZEALAND TEST CAPTAIN

Latham has already captained New Zealand in nine tests, taking over from Williamson when he was recovering from an elbow injury. He has also led New Zealand in 44 one-day internationals....

BY STAFF WRITER

Tim Southee has stepped down as New Zealand's Test captain after the team's heavy loss in a two-test series in Sri Lanka. Opening batter Tom Latham will take over the captaincy. The 35-year-old Southee took over as test captain from Kane Williamson in 2022, leading New Zealand in 14 tests with six wins, six losses, and two draws.

The veteran swing bowler has taken 382 wickets in 102 tests, placing him second on the New Zealand all-time list behind Richard Hadlee. He has 35 wickets in his 14 tests as captain and took only two wickets in the Sri Lanka series, in which New Zealand lost the first test by 63 runs and the second by an innings and 154 runs.

“Captaining the Black Caps in a format that’s so special to me has been an absolute honor and a privilege,” Southee said. “I’ve always tried to put the team first throughout my career, and I believe this decision is the best one for the team.

“I believe the way I can best serve the team moving forward is focusing on my performances on the field and getting back to my best, to continue taking wickets and helping New Zealand win test matches. I will, as I’ve always done, continue to support my teammates, especially the exciting young bowlers making their way on the international stage."

Southee wished Latham well as captain, "and he knows I’ll be there to support him on his journey, as he has done for me over the years.”

Latham has already captained New Zealand in nine tests, taking over from Williamson when he was recovering from an elbow injury. He has also led New Zealand in 44 one-day internationals.

Black Caps coach Gary Stead praised Southee's contribution as captain.

“Tim’s a fantastic player and a very good leader who is held in high regard by the players and support staff,” Stead said. “He's been a great servant of New Zealand cricket for over 17 years, playing on the international stage, and I’d like to acknowledge his humility in stepping down from the role of test captain.

“It’s not easy giving up something you love but Tim is a true team-man and he’s made the decision with the team’s best interests at heart.” ■

FEATURE

END OF BABAR AZAM'S CAPTAINCY ERA

The PCB said it had backed Babar as the T20 and ODI captain, but his decision to resign reflected "his desire to focus more on making a greater impact as a player." Babar announced he was stepping down, saying he wanted to deliver more for the team as a player...

TCL
PAKISTA

BY STAFF WRITER

The Pakistan Cricket Board accepted Babar Azam's resignation as white-ball captain of the national team and asked the selection committee to recommend his successor. The PCB said it had backed Babar as the T20 and ODI captain, but his decision to resign reflected "his desire to focus more on making a greater impact as a player." Babar announced he was stepping down, saying he wanted to deliver more for the team as a player and could make a bigger impact by concentrating on his batting.

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"Babar Azam tendered his resignation and it has been accepted," the PCB said in a statement. "The national selection committee has been tasked with beginning the process of formulating future white-ball cricket strategies, including recommending a new captain."

PCB's white-ball selection committee includes head coach Gary Kirsten and former international cricketer Asad Shafiq. Pakistan's white-ball schedule over the next six months is busy. It starts with the tour of Australia next month, during which it will play three ODIs and three Twenty20s.

Pakistan's white-ball team then tours Zimbabwe and South Africa before playing a triangular ODI series at home against New Zealand and South Africa as part of its preparation for the Champions Trophy, which is scheduled to be held in Pakistan in February. Pakistan is also expected to tour New Zealand for five T20s and three ODIs after the Champions Trophy in March.

Babar Azam revealed he had stepped down from Pakistan's white-ball captaincy only six months after being reappointed ODI and Twenty20 skipper by the Pakistan Cricket Board. "I have decided to resign as captain of the Pakistan men's cricket team, effective as of my notification to the PCB and Team Management last month," Babar said on X.

"Captaincy has been a rewarding experience, but it's added a significant workload. I want to prioritize my performance, enjoy my batting, and spend quality time with my family, which brings me joy."

Babar stepped down as all-formats captain — including tests — after Pakistan failed to make the semifinals of the 50-over World Cup in India last year. Shaheen Shah Afridi led Pakistan briefly in the T20 format but was removed from the captaincy after Pakistan lost 4-1 to New Zealand. Pakistan hasn't played an ODI since the World Cup. Mohsin Naqvi, chairman of the Pakistan Cricket Board, reappointed Babar as white-ball captain in March, but he could only win a bilateral series against Ireland 2-1. Pakistan drew the home T20 series against New Zealand 2-2 before losing 2-0 to England just before the Twenty20 World Cup, where Pakistan failed to reach the Super Eight stage after losing to co-host United States and archrival India in the group stage.

Babar, who hasn't struck a half-century in his last 16 test innings, scored heavily in the recent domestic Champions Cup One-Day Tournament, where he hit a century for Stallions and finished as the tournament's fourth top-scorer with 230 runs in four matches. Babar didn't lead the Stallions and played under the captaincy of Mohammad Haris. Babar led Pakistan in 43 ODIs, winning 26 and losing 15. He also captained Pakistan in 85 T20s with a win-loss record of 48-29. Babar said it was an "honor to lead" Pakistan, but he believed it was time for him to step down and focus on his playing role. "By stepping down, I will gain clarity moving forward and focus more energy on my game and personal growth." ■

FIVE SHOCK RELEASES FROM FRANCHISES THAT MIGHT HAPPEN AHEAD OF THE IPL 2025 MEGA AUCTION

Rohit Sharma, the stalwart of Mumbai Indians, could be shockingly released ahead of IPL 2025. After Mumbai reinstated Hardik Pandya as captain in the 2024 season, Rohit played a secondary role. The tensions between...

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

The IPL 2025 season is just around the corner, with the mega auction approaching fast. Excitement is already building, especially as Kolkata Knight Riders come in as defending champions. While the retention rules are still uncertain, it's expected that the previous rule of retaining a maximum of four players, including no more than two overseas stars, will remain in place. This puts franchises in a tough spot, having to make difficult decisions about whom to keep and who might be released. As teams strategize for the future, some big names could find themselves in the auction pool, which could come as a huge surprise to fans. Based on current form, team dynamics, and future potential, here are five shocking player releases that might happen ahead of the 2025 IPL auction – decisions that could reshape the teams and set the stage for an intense bidding war.

1) NITISH KUMAR REDDY (SUNRISERS HYDERABAD)

Sunrisers Hyderabad's rising all-rounder Nitish Kumar Reddy took the 2024 IPL by storm, earning the Emerging Player award. With 303 runs at an average of 33.67 and a strike rate of 142.92, his contributions were pivotal in shoring up SRH's middle order. At just 21, he appears to be a bright prospect for the future. However, SRH faces a tough decision with only four retention slots available, and priorities lie elsewhere. With Australian opener Travis Head delivering stellar performances and captain Pat Cummins leading the side to the final, these two seem like locks for retention. Nitish's exclusion may come as a surprise, but SRH might prefer more seasoned campaigners or a balanced approach, given the limited number of retentions. Letting go of such a talented youngster would certainly raise eyebrows, but the franchise might be forced to make this bold call in preparation for a reshaped 2025 squad.

2) ROHIT SHARMA (MUMBAI INDIANS)

Rohit Sharma, the stalwart of Mumbai Indians, could be shockingly released ahead of IPL 2025. After Mumbai reinstated Hardik Pandya as captain in the 2024 season, Rohit played a secondary role. The tensions between the two, fueled by differing leadership styles and the growing divide among players, cast a cloud over MI's future plans. Rohit, who has already retired from international T20 cricket, might be considered past his prime, especially as the franchise looks to rebuild around younger players. His age, coupled with a string of injuries and Mumbai's vision for the future, makes him a potential candidate for release. Despite being synonymous with Mumbai's IPL legacy—leading them to five titles—his exit would mark the end of an era. Letting go of such an iconic figure would be shocking, but it could open doors for a new generation of leadership and talent in the team.

3) SHIVAM DUBE (CHENNAI SUPER KINGS)

Shivam Dube has been a vital cog in Chennai Super Kings' setup over the past three seasons, amassing over 1,200 runs. His big-hitting ability and crucial contributions in the middle order made him a fan favorite. However, as CSK transitions to the next phase with Ruturaj Gaikwad as captain, Dube's future with the franchise looks uncertain. With key players like Ravindra Jadeja, Pathirana, and possibly MS Dhoni taking up the other retention spots, the fourth retention could be a tough choice. Though Dube has proven his worth, CSK might prioritize bowlers or all-rounders who can make a bigger impact in crunch moments. If Dube is released, it would be a shock considering his solid performances, but the retention crunch forces teams into difficult decisions. His release could lead to fierce competition for his signature at the auction, given his value as a dependable middle-order batter.

4) FAF DU PLESSIS (ROYAL CHALLENGERS BANGALORE)

Faf du Plessis' leadership brought some stability to Royal Challengers Bangalore, taking them to the playoffs in two of the last three seasons. Despite being one of the most reliable performers for RCB, the South African veteran could be released ahead of IPL 2025. His consistent run-scoring and calm leadership kept RCB in the hunt for silverware, but age might play a role in the franchise's decision-making. At 40, Faf might be considered surplus to RCB's long-term vision, which could focus on building around younger talents. With a limited number of retentions allowed and competition for retention spots fierce, RCB might opt for fresh leadership and a dynamic future. Releasing a player of Faf's stature and consistency would be a major surprise, but given the franchise's past of making bold moves, it might just happen as they aim to break their trophy drought.

5) VENKATESH IYER (KOLKATA KNIGHT RIDERS)

Venkatesh Iyer has been one of Kolkata Knight Riders' most influential players in recent seasons, contributing with both bat and ball. His ability to deliver in crucial situations and his all-round skills made him a fan favorite. However, KKR's retention dilemma could see him being shockingly released ahead of IPL 2025. With Shreyas Iyer as captain, Rinku Singh emerging as a star, and overseas players like Sunil Narine and Andre Russell (or potentially Phil Salt) also in the mix, Venkatesh's place may be sacrificed to fit within the four retention cap. Letting go of a player of his caliber would be a surprise, given his consistent contributions and potential to shine in various roles. However, KKR may opt to focus on retaining a balanced core, and Venkatesh might find himself heading into the auction, where his all-round talent would surely spark a bidding war among franchises.

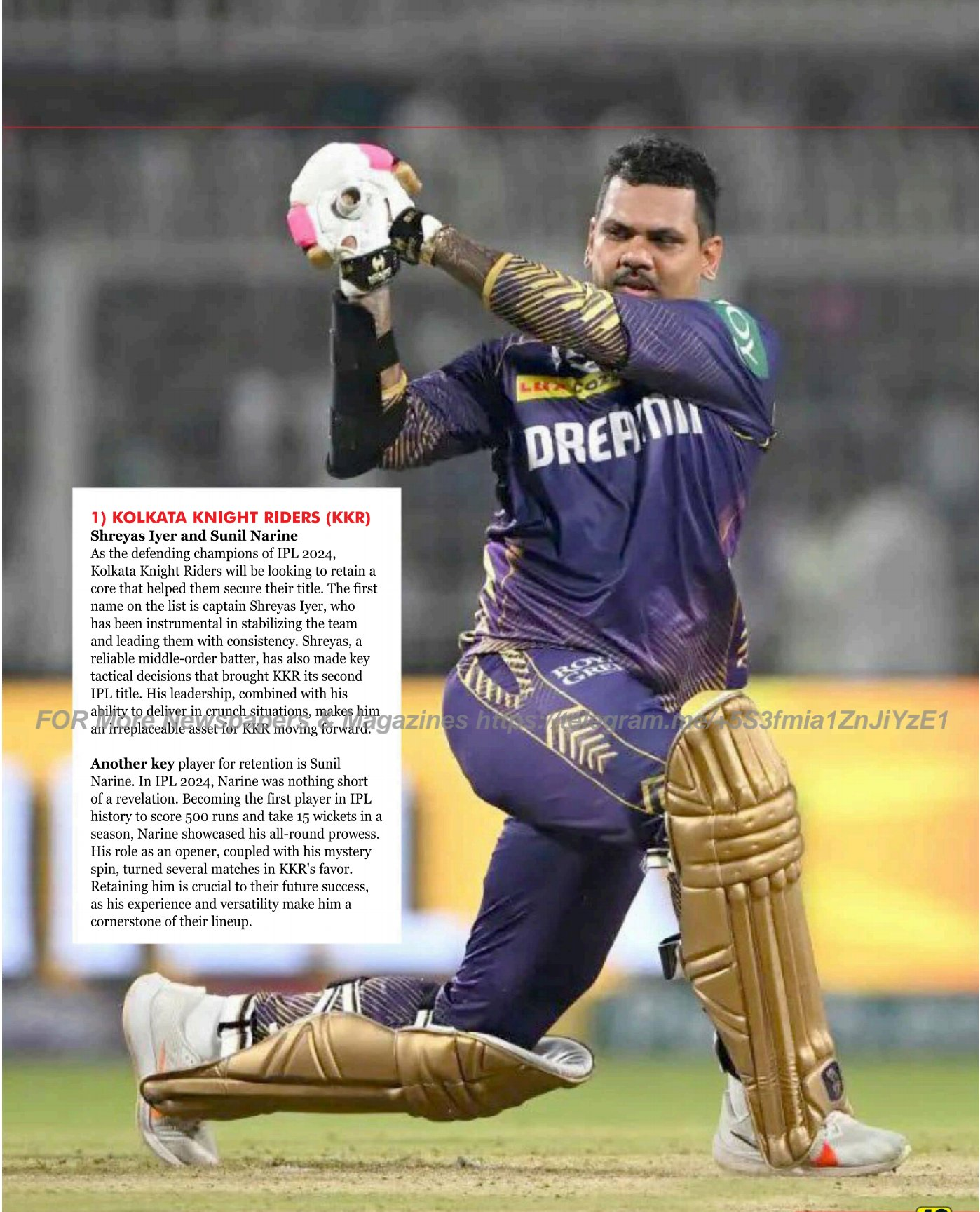
As the 2025 IPL auction approaches, these potential releases are sure to generate buzz and speculation. Teams are faced with the difficult task of balancing experience, leadership, and the potential of rising stars, making the next few months critical for franchise strategies. Each of these possible releases would send ripples through the IPL landscape, leaving fans and analysts questioning what lies ahead for these players.

IPL 2025: TWO PLAYERS EACH FRANCHISE MUST RETAIN

Shreyas Iyer and Sunil Narine As the defending champions of IPL 2024, Kolkata Knight Riders will be looking to retain a core that helped them secure their title. The first name on the list is captain Shreyas Iyer, who has been instrumental in stabilizing the team...

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

With the IPL 2025 mega auction approaching, teams are once again faced with difficult decisions about player retention. The retention rules remain uncertain, but based on the previous pattern of allowing four retentions, teams must carefully select their core players. While every franchise has multiple stars, retaining the right players will shape their future in the next cycle of IPL seasons. Here, we look at two key players each team must retain while keeping in mind that franchises can retain two additional players later.



1) KOLKATA KNIGHT RIDERS (KKR)

Shreyas Iyer and Sunil Narine

As the defending champions of IPL 2024, Kolkata Knight Riders will be looking to retain a core that helped them secure their title. The first name on the list is captain Shreyas Iyer, who has been instrumental in stabilizing the team and leading them with consistency. Shreyas, a reliable middle-order batter, has also made key tactical decisions that brought KKR its second IPL title. His leadership, combined with his ability to deliver in crunch situations, makes him an irreplaceable asset for KKR moving forward.

Another key player for retention is Sunil Narine. In IPL 2024, Narine was nothing short of a revelation. Becoming the first player in IPL history to score 500 runs and take 15 wickets in a season, Narine showcased his all-round prowess. His role as an opener, coupled with his mystery spin, turned several matches in KKR's favor. Retaining him is crucial to their future success, as his experience and versatility make him a cornerstone of their lineup.

2) SUNRISERS HYDERABAD (SRH)

Pat Cummins and Travis Head

Sunrisers Hyderabad, the IPL 2024 runners-up, have built a strong core, with Pat Cummins and Travis Head leading the charge. Cummins, the team captain, led from the front with both ball and bat. His leadership, combined with his 18 wickets in the season, helped SRH navigate their way to the final. Cummins' control with the ball, particularly in high-pressure situations, makes him an obvious retention for the team.

Travis Head, meanwhile, has established himself as a dynamic top-order batter. Scoring 567 runs in 15 matches at an astonishing strike rate of 191, Head has transformed the SRH batting lineup, providing crucial starts and consistency. His aggressive style has been key to SRH's success in 2024, and retaining both Cummins and Head would secure SRH's future as a formidable contender in the league.

3) CHENNAI SUPER KINGS (CSK)

Ruturaj Gaikwad and Matheesha Pathirana

Chennai Super Kings have always built their squad around a solid core, and two players they must retain are Ruturaj Gaikwad and Matheesha Pathirana. Ruturaj, the captain of CSK, has been exceptional in leading the team, and his performances with the bat have been top-notch. Gaikwad, a two-time Orange Cap winner, was a key part of CSK's IPL 2024 title, and his ascension to captaincy signals CSK's commitment to nurturing a long-term leader. His calmness under pressure and consistency at the top order make him a must-retain for CSK.

Matheesha Pathirana, CSK's death-bowling specialist, has emerged as an irreplaceable asset. Known for his slinging action and yorker accuracy, Pathirana has made a name for himself by containing runs in the death overs and taking key wickets. His ability to handle high-pressure situations with composure makes him essential for CSK's future campaigns.

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4) ROYAL CHALLENGERS BANGALORE (RCB)

Virat Kohli and Will Jacks

RCB, known for its star-studded lineup, would naturally look to retain Virat Kohli. The franchise icon has been the face of RCB since its inception and remains a fan favorite. Despite RCB's ups and downs, Kohli's individual performances with the bat have always been spectacular, and his presence adds immense value to the team both on and off the field. His experience and ability to anchor the innings are irreplaceable, making him the first-choice retention.

Will Jacks is another key player RCB must retain. In IPL 2024, Jacks proved his worth, scoring 230 runs in just 8 matches, including a century and a fifty, while also chipping in with two wickets. Jacks represents the future of RCB, and his all-round abilities make him a key part of the team's rebuild strategy. His explosive batting at the top and his ability to bowl part-time spin makes him a versatile option for the team.

5) DELHI CAPITALS (DC)

Rishabh Pant and Jake Fraser-McGurk

Rishabh Pant is the obvious choice for Delhi Capitals' retention. The captain and wicketkeeper-batter has been central to DC's success in recent years. Pant's aggressive batting, leadership qualities, and ability to change the course of a match in a matter of overs make him an indispensable asset for Delhi. Despite his injury setbacks, his contributions with both bat and gloves are irreplaceable for the franchise.

Jake Fraser-McGurk, who debuted in IPL 2024, has quickly risen to prominence. In just 9 matches, he scored 330 runs at a strike rate of 234, making him a player with enormous potential. His ability to accelerate the innings and finish games makes him an exciting talent to build around for the future. Retaining Fraser-McGurk would give Delhi a dynamic option in the middle order, capable of taking the team to the next level.

6) PUNJAB KINGS (PBKS)

Sam Curran and Shashank Singh

Sam Curran has been a standout performer for Punjab Kings, and his all-round skills make him a top retention choice. Curran's ability to contribute with both bat and ball makes him one of the most valuable players in T20 cricket. His leadership in the field and knack for delivering in high-pressure situations add further value to his retention.

Shashank Singh, the surprise package of IPL 2024, was a revelation for Punjab Kings. Scoring 354 runs at a strike rate of 161, Shashank often took PBKS to victory with his explosive batting. His ability to take on the bowlers at any stage of the innings makes him a key player to retain, ensuring PBKS continues to have a dependable middle-order batter.

7) MUMBAI INDIANS (MI)

Hardik Pandya and Jasprit Bumrah

Mumbai Indians will undoubtedly retain Hardik Pandya, who returned as captain in IPL 2024. His leadership skills, combined with his ability to deliver match-winning performances with both bat and ball, make him the backbone of MI's future plans. Hardik's experience and ability to adapt to different match situations make him a must-retain for the franchise.

Jasprit Bumrah, arguably the best fast bowler in the world, is another obvious retention for MI. His unmatched ability to bowl in the powerplay and death overs makes him the best fast-bowling asset in IPL cricket. With Bumrah in their ranks, MI has the firepower to dominate with the ball, making him essential to their lineup.

8) RAJASTHAN ROYALS (RR)

Sanju Samson and Riyan Parag

Sanju Samson, Rajasthan Royals' captain, has been a consistent performer for the franchise. Having led RR to a final and a playoff in the last two seasons, Samson's leadership and batting at the top have been instrumental in the team's progress. His ability to anchor an innings while accelerating when needed makes him an essential retention for RR.

Riyan Parag, with a standout season in IPL 2024, forced his way into the Indian team. Scoring 573 runs with four fifties, Parag was one of the standout performers of the season. His all-round abilities and aggressive batting style have made him a fan favorite and a key asset for RR moving forward.

9) LUCKNOW SUPER GIANTS (LSG)

Marcus Stoinis and Nicholas Pooran

With KL Rahul's retention uncertain, Lucknow Super Giants would likely prioritize their two overseas stars, Marcus Stoinis and Nicholas Pooran. Stoinis' all-round abilities with bat and ball make him invaluable to the side. His power-hitting and ability to bowl in crunch moments add balance to LSG's lineup.

Nicholas Pooran, with his explosive batting and wicketkeeping, provides another dynamic option for LSG. Pooran can change the course of a game in a matter of overs, making him a crucial part of the team's future plans.

10) GUJARAT TITANS (GT)

Shubman Gill and Sai Sudharsan

Gujarat Titans would likely retain their captain, Shubman Gill, who has led from the front with both bat and tactical acumen. His consistency at the top of the order has been key to GT's success. Gill's ability to build innings and accelerate at the right moments makes him a must-retain for the defending champions.

Sai Sudharsan, with 1,034 runs in 35 matches, has been a revelation for GT. His century and six fifties demonstrate his ability to handle pressure and perform in crucial situations. Retaining Sudharsan would solidify GT's batting lineup and provide them with a reliable top-order option for the future.

TOP STORIES

“It was a very tough match, obviously, playing against Novak is one of the toughest challenges we have”

- Jannik Sinner on beating Serbian star in the final of the Shanghai Masters

MBAPPÉ'S REPRESENTATIVES DISMISS RAPE CLAIM

French soccer star Kylian Mbappé’s representatives have rejected as “false and irresponsible” reports in Swedish media saying he is the subject of a rape investigation in the Nordic country. Without citing sources, several Swedish media including tabloids Expressen and Aftonbladet and broadcasters SVT and TV4 reported that the Real Madrid striker was the subject of a rape claim following a visit to Stockholm last week. In response to the reports, Swedish prosecutors issued a brief statement saying a rape had been reported to police, but didn’t name any suspect. Mbappé's communications team accused Swedish media of spreading “slanderous” rumors.

“It is the appropriate time to put an end to a career that has been long”

- Rafael Nadal announces retirement

HEALTH SCARE FOR SERENA WILLIAMS

Serena Williams says she had a benign branchial cyst “the size of a small grapefruit” removed from her neck and “all is OK.” The retired tennis star, who turned 43 last month, posted on social media that she found a lump on her neck in May, had an MRI exam, and was told she didn't need to get it removed if she didn't want to. So she didn't then, “but it kept growing,” Williams said. After more tests, including a biopsy that was negative for cancer, Williams said, her doctors said she should have a procedure. She showed video of herself in a hospital bed and wrote: “So this is me removing it. I am feeling so grateful, and fortunate everything worked out, and most of all I’m healthy.” In a separate social media post, she said she is “still recovering, but getting better. Health always comes first.”

MESSI SLAMS A HAT-TRICK

Lionel Messi scored his 10th international hat trick to raise his career total to 112 goals and also had a pair of assists to lead Argentina over Bolivia 6-0 in a World Cup qualifier. After missing a pair of October qualifiers while recovering from a right ankle injury sustained in the Copa America, Messi played the entire match before raucous fans at Estadio Monumental who chanted his name after he opened the scoring in the 19th minute. Messi added goals in the 84th and 86th minutes. The 37-year-old is second on the career scoring list behind the 133 of Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo. Argentina leads South American qualifying with 22 points after 10 matches, three points clear of second-place Colombia.

SEXUAL ASSAULT CASE

A French prosecutor has requested a jail sentence of two years and six months, including 18 months suspended, against French soccer star Wissam Ben Yedder after he went on trial for sexually assaulting a woman last month. The prosecutor said the firm prison term could be adaptable and Ben Yedder's lawyers are confident he will escape jail even if he is convicted, lawyer Marie Roumiantseva told The Associated Press "Although not a single day in prison against Ben Yedder has been asked for, the requisitions are very harsh for facts that are both legally questionable and not very serious," Roumiantseva said. The court will hand down its decision on Nov. 12. The hearing took place after a woman filed a lawsuit against Ben Yedder for sexual assault last month.

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THOMAS TUCHEL HIRED AS ENGLAND HEAD COACH

Thomas Tuchel was hired as England coach and tasked with the challenge of ending the national team's decades-long wait for a trophy. The German, who previously managed Paris Saint-Germain, Chelsea and Bayern Munich, has signed an 18-month contract that begins in January and runs through to the 2026 World Cup in the United States. "This is a really exciting day for the English game. We we've appointed one of the very best coaches in the world," said English Football Association chief Mark Bullingham at Tuchel's Wembley Stadium unveiling. "Our aim is always to win a major tournament and we believe Thomas gives us the best possible chance to do that at the next men's World Cup."

PATTON KIZZIRE ENDS DROUGHT WITH 5-STROKE VICTORY IN FEDEX CUP FALL OPENER

Unlike in 2023 when Theegala was followed by a large gallery on his way to winning, Kizzire and Lipsky played the final round in front of a small crowd at the picturesque course in the heart of the Napa Valley wine country. For the second straight day, Kizzire had to make up...

CapTech
Pro V1

BY STAFF WRITER

Patton Kizzire ended a long victory drought in the Procore Championship, closing with a scrambling 2-under 70 for a tournament-record, five-stroke victory in the FedEx Cup Fall opener at Silverado Country Club. Kizzire had gone 176 events without a victory after winning events in Mexico and Hawaii in a two-month span in late 2017 and early 2018.

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"I'm going to enjoy this win ," Kizzire said. "It's just so sweet to get through the ups and downs. That's life. You just got to stay positive. That's what led me to here, to right now."

The 38-year-old former Auburn player earned a PGA Tour card for the next two years after entering the event 132nd in the fight to earn a card with a top-125 finish in the standings. He also gets spots in the Masters and PGA Championship and The Sentry at Kapalua.

Kizzire finished at 20-under 268. On Sunday, he repeatedly misfired off the tee for a second consecutive day, but stayed steady with his approach shots and had three birdies, an eagle and three bogeys.

"I knew that it would be difficult not to get ahead of myself with a four-shot lead heading into today," Kizzire said. "I wrote down in my yard book, 'I am here, I I am now.' Kept going back to that. That helped me be disciplined and stay present. That's what really helped me come out on top."

David Lipsky was second after a 71.

Patrick Fishburn (71) was third at 14 under. Mackenzie Hughes (72), Ben Silverman (71) and Greyson Sigg (72) were another stroke back.

Sahith Theegala, the winner last year, closed with a 72 to tie for fifth at 12-under 276.

Unlike in 2023 when Theegala was followed by a large gallery on his way to winning, Kizzire and Lipsky played the final round in front of a small crowd at the picturesque course in the heart of the Napa Valley wine country. For the second straight day, Kizzire had to make up for his erratic tee shots. He missed 11 fairways and hit three drives into bunkers but got out of trouble and limited the damage each time. Lipskey also had issues off the tee trying to battle winds that had been mostly absent for the first three rounds.

"It was really tough out there," Lipsky said. "The wind was swirling and it was strong and the greens were so firm. Where the put some of those pins is really tough to get close."

After Lipsky made birdies on Nos. 1 and 4 to get within two shots, Kizzire responded with an eagle on the par-5 fifth. Kizzire hit his second shot past the green, then holed a soft wedge shot coming back from 50 feet to get to 20 under. Kizzire bogeyed No. 11 after another errant tee shot, while Lipsky birdied to get within two strokes again. Kizzire then made a birdie save after driving into a green-side bunker on No. 12, and had another birdie on No. 13.

Kizzire was ahead by five strokes after a birdie on No. 15, then missed a short par putt on No. 16. He had a chance to get the stroke back on No. 17, but pushed his putt to the right of the hole and settled for par. ■

PEP GUARDIOLA IS FACING MORE QUESTIONS ABOUT HIS MANCHESTER CITY FUTURE

Guardiola likely knows he will never find another club like City in elite European soccer. Backed by the spectacular riches of Abu Dhabi's ruling family, he has been allowed to build a team in his image, with exorbitant amounts spent to assemble a squad that has enjoyed unprecedented....

BY STAFF WRITER

Into the final year of his contract at Manchester City, questions are being asked again about Pep Guardiola's future.

“I love English football, it is fantastic, really enjoyable. They leave you alone to get on with the job. That doesn’t happen anywhere else," the City manager said.

Guardiola has already stayed at City for longer than any of his other managerial jobs - and longer than many expected when he was appointed in 2016. It will be nine years by the end of the season, compared to four at Barcelona and three at Bayern Munich.

“It’s a great club. I really feel good being here,” he said.

Guardiola likely knows he will never find another club like City in elite European soccer. Backed by the spectacular riches of Abu Dhabi's ruling family, he has been allowed to build a team in his image, with exorbitant amounts spent to assemble a squad that has enjoyed unprecedented dominance of the Premier League.

He has close relationships with his immediate superiors at the club - CEO Ferran Soriano and sporting director Txiki Begiristain, who he previously worked with at Barcelona - and he is idolized by the supporters. That's a difficult package to walk away

from and whenever the possibility has arisen, Guardiola has been convinced to extend his contract.

It has reached that point once again where he must decide if he has the energy or will to go on for longer.

Jurgen Klopp's decision to stand down at Liverpool last season was evidence of the toll soccer can take on managers. For long periods he matched Guardiola stride for stride in the battle for supremacy - and even halted City's rule when winning the title in 2020.

The intensity of their rivalry forced each man to greater heights, and in January, Klopp made the shocking announcement that he needed a break from it all.

"It is not what I want to (do). It is just what I think is 100% right," the German said at the time.

Guardiola did likewise when taking a 12-month sabbatical after his first job at Barcelona. He's now been in continuous employment since taking over at Bayern in 2013 - winning league titles in all but two of those 11 seasons.

Those are the levels he has been operating at, and that dominance should not be confused with an easy ride - particularly during his time in England when Klopp's Liverpool and, latterly, Mikel Arteta's Arsenal have pushed City to the limits of their powers to remain at the summit.

Arteta has added a new dimension to England's top flight by transforming Arsenal's fortunes since leaving his role as Guardiola's assistant to take over at The Emirates Stadium in 2019.

Two seasons ago, Arsenal spent 248 days at the top

of the standings but was eventually beaten to the title by City. No other team had spent so long in first place without being crowned champion.

Last season, Arsenal went even closer when taking the race down to the last day of the campaign but eventually finished two points behind City.

Arteta has signed a new three-year contract, which is a statement of Arsenal's faith in him to continue to challenge Guardiola.

Over the last two years, however, Arteta - like Klopp before him - has discovered the extraordinary levels required to topple City.

After topping the standings for so long in 2022-23, Arsenal recorded its most wins in a Premier League campaign - 28 - last season and still ended up empty-handed.

A return of 89 points was the club's second highest in the Premier League era - one short of the 90 achieved by its 'Invincibles' team that won the title in 2004.

Arsenal also ended a winless run against City dating back to 2016 - taking four points from two games against its title rival and still came up short.

So, there is little evidence of Guardiola wilting in the face of a fresh challenger. He won a treble of trophies, including a first Champions League for City in 2023 and an English record fourth successive top division title last term.

If this is to be Guardiola's final season, he is already leading it from the front. ■

VERSTAPPEN SHOWS HIS PETTY SIDE WHEN FIA FOOLISHLY PUNISHES HIM FOR CURSING

Verstappen was the youngest driver ever to start an F1 race and the youngest F1 race winner, and he has made clear he doesn't plan to stay to become the oldest winner in the sport's history.

BY STAFF WRITER

Max Verstappen said a bad word — it started with an F — in a formal news conference to describe how his race car was performing. The man who called for Verstappen to be punished also drew sharp criticism for his own choice of words. Verstappen's sanction for his egregious behavior? The three-time Formula 1 champion was ordered by the sport's governing body to complete a day of community service because the FIA has apparently banned cursing.

The crackdown had been foreshadowed — Ferrari team principal Fred Vasseur and Mercedes boss Toto Wolff were both summoned to speak to the stewards last November about their language at a news conference in Las Vegas — and FIA President Mohammed Ben Sulayem publicly rebuked cursing earlier this month.

Motorsport.com reported that the FIA had asked Formula One Management to better limit the naughty language broadcast during races. While the curse words — said on team radio that is accessible to the public — are bleeped out on television, Ben Sulayem found the frequency of the poor language unsettling.

“We have to differentiate between our sport — motorsport — and rap music,” Ben Sulayem said. “We’re not rappers, you know.”

Lewis Hamilton, who already felt he'd been personally targeted by Ben Sulayem when the president banned the wearing of jewelry during competition upon election, felt the comments had a racial element to them.

“I don’t like how he has expressed it. Saying ‘rappers’ is very stereotypical," said Hamilton, the only Black driver in F1. "If you think about it, most rappers are Black. So it says, ‘We are not like them.’ So I think those are the wrong choice of words and there is a racial element there.”

So Verstappen shouldn't have been surprised when

the FIA actually slapped his wrist for cursing. The Dutch driver responded with his own form of protest by trolling every remaining news conference of the Singapore Grand Prix.

It felt a bit "I'm just here so I won't get fined" Marshawn Lynch-like in that Verstappen showed up to his required media obligations, but offered only the briefest of answers. He made clear he was doing so because he no longer felt he could speak freely in official F1 settings.

He invited reporters to follow him out to the paddock for an unmonitored and unfiltered exchange both Saturday and Sunday, when he added this over-policing to the list of reasons why the 26-year-old may have a very short F1 career.

Verstappen was the youngest driver to ever start an F1 race, the youngest F1 race winner, and has made clear he doesn't plan to stick around to become the oldest winner in the sport's history. This latest drama may hasten his timeline for retirement.

"For sure, these kinds of things definitely decide my future," Verstappen said. "When you can't be yourself, or you have to deal with these kinds of silly things, I think now I'm at the stage of my career that you don't want to be dealing with this all the time. It's really tiring."

He was also critical of Carlos Sainz Jr. being sanctioned for crossing the track on foot under a red flag after Sainz crashed in qualifying.

"I mean, what are we talking about? He knows what he's doing. We're not stupid. These kinds of things, like when I saw it getting noted, I was like, 'My God,'" Verstappen said.

F1 considers its drivers the most elite in the world, so it isn't wrong for Ben Sulayem to want to hold them to a high standard. But his standards are likely rooted in his own beliefs and not in sync to the realities of professional sports. Globally, audiences are accustomed to hearing an occasional curse word caught on a live mic during a sporting event. Sometimes the

zoom
Red Bull
TAG HEUER
RAUCH
Mobil 1
BYBIT
HONDA
VISA
telcel
ROK

words are said casually because what's considered a slur in your country might be commonly accepted slang in another. But many times the cursing is out of anger or frustration because of the high stakes, minimal margins for error, and intense effort put into each athletes craft. And, the cursing is very rarely done openly for the entire world to hear. In racing, specifically, it is a privilege that spectators can eavesdrop on team communications over the radio. The FIA could eliminate that capability if it was truly worried about offending listeners.

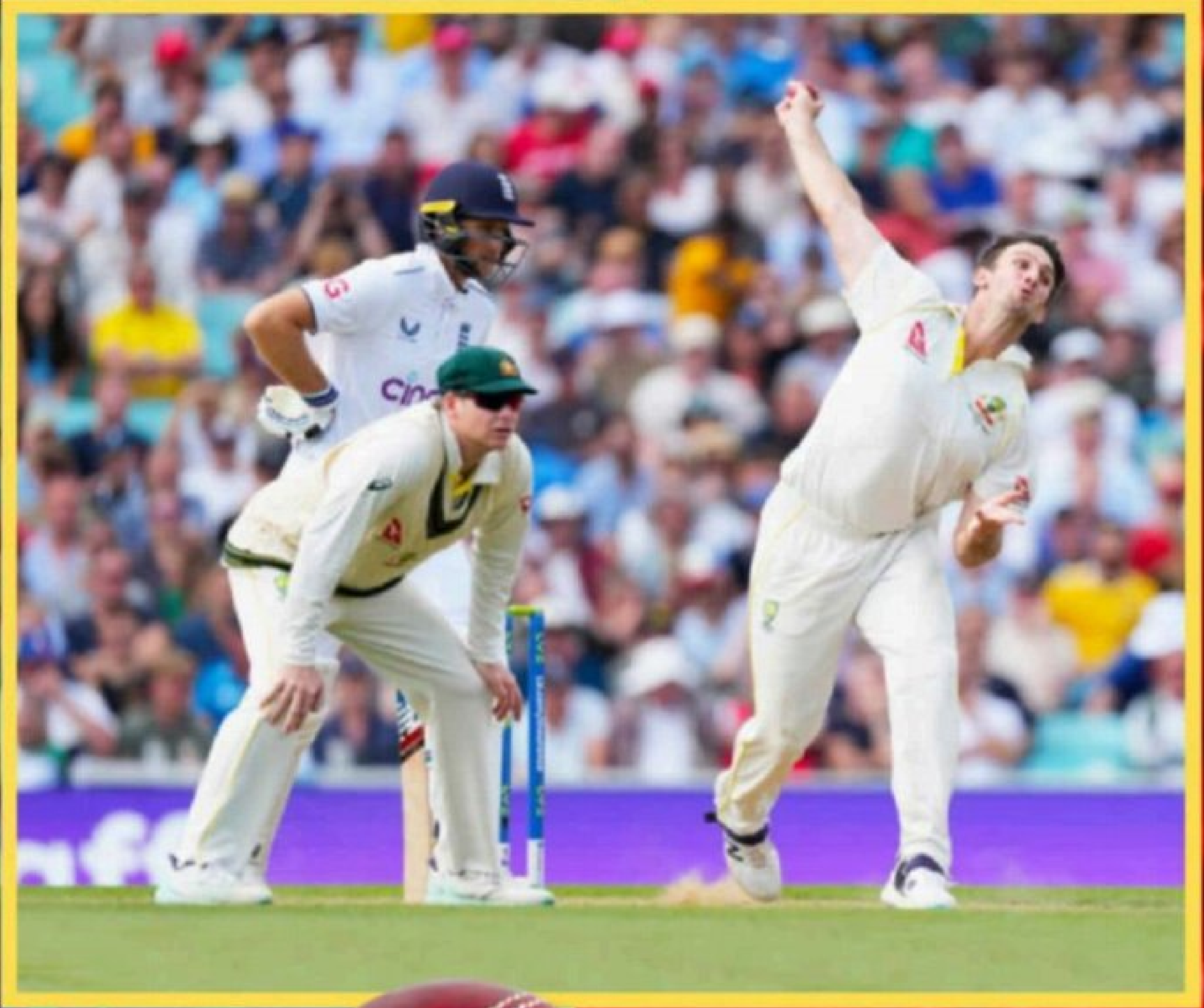
In the case of Verstappen — or even Wolff and Vasseur — their cursing came in news conferences that aren't designed to be consumed by the general public. F1 at any time could stop cutting clips and posting them online and truly make the sessions media-only. But F1 is now owned by a media company and Liberty Media knows exactly what it is doing in delivering content any way possible. Verstappen is right. This all seems rather silly, to the point of childish, especially from an organization that has refused all year to comment on the complaint against Red Bull boss Christian Horner filed by a suspended employee to the FIA ethics committee. The same ethics committee, mind you, that investigated and cleared within a month a pair of whistleblower complaints filed against Ben Sulayem. Susie Wolff, the wife of the Mercedes boss and head of F1's all-female F1 Academy, has also filed a criminal complaint in France against the FIA over its brief December conflict of interest investigation into the alleged sharing of confidential information between husband and wife.

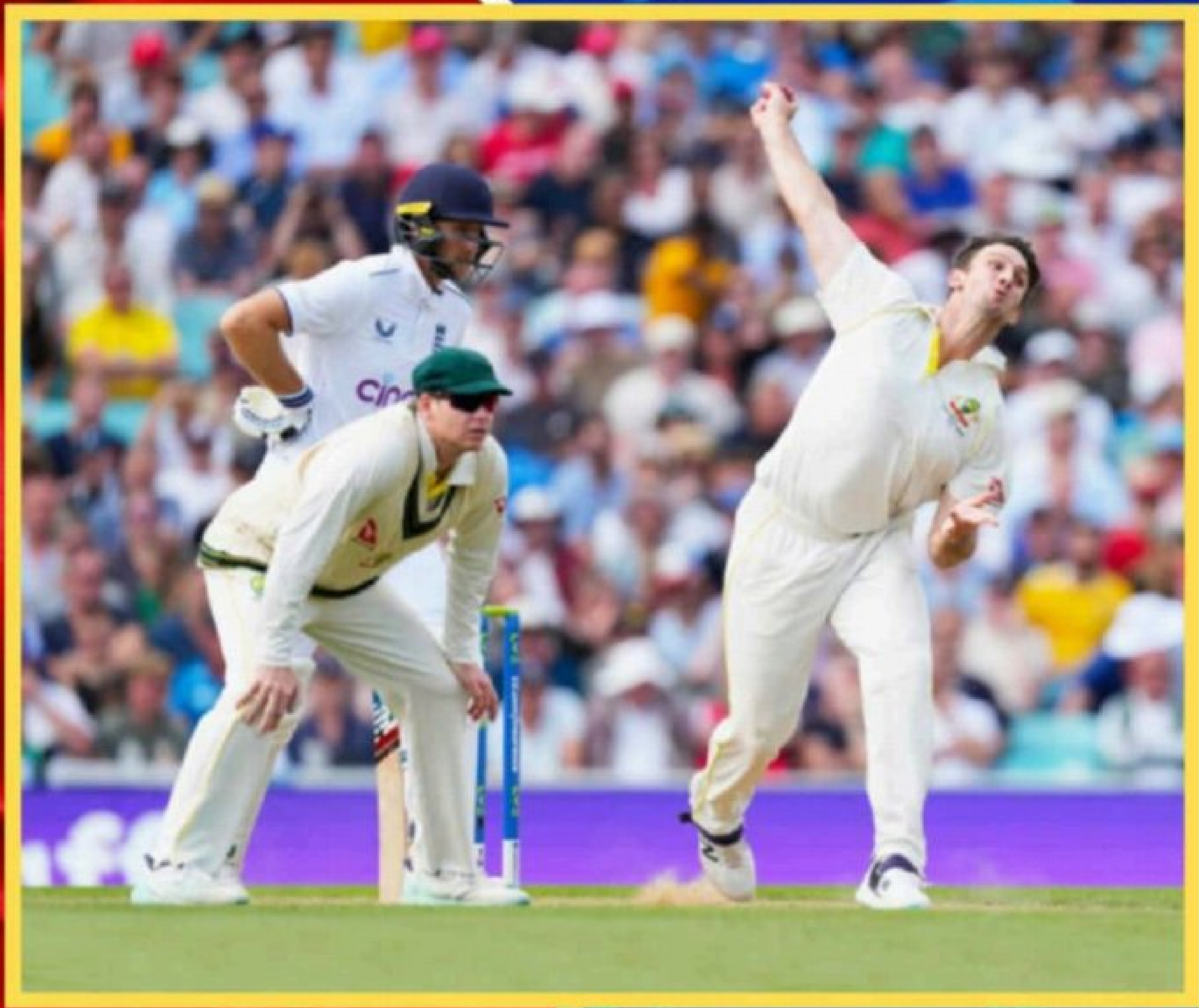
Ben Sulayem has made strides in cleaning up online abuse, has fought to get Michael Andretti and Cadillac onto the grid and tackled other legitimate issues facing motorsports and F1. But some of the fights he's honed in on seem small and Hamilton has a right to question if they are personal.

In the case of Verstappen saying a bad word, it seems the champion was punished to make an example. Verstappen made sure it backfired to look as silly as it is. ■

FIND SIX DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THESE TWO PICTURES

★★★ CONTEST





In this contest you have to spot six differences between both the pictures. Three lucky winners will get a Parker pen each.

RULES & REGULATIONS FOR THE CONTEST

- **Last date for entries:** November 25, 2024.
- A draw will determine the winner.
- Winners name will be announced in the next issue of cricket today.
- The prizes may vary from the one shown.
- Send in your answers along with your name, occupation, address, contact No. and Email ID at our postal address.

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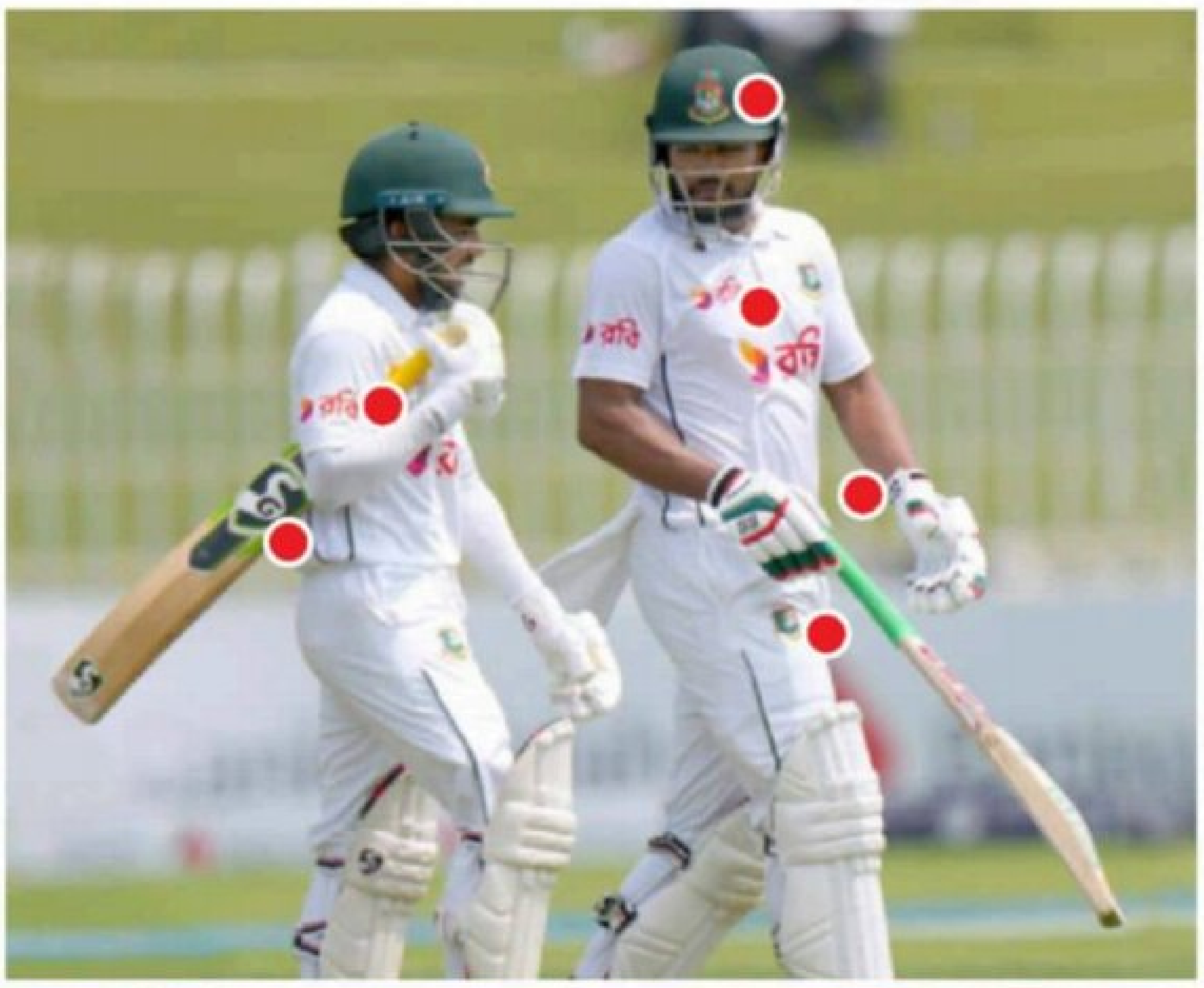

Last months's winners: Natraj (Delhi), SashiRaj (Noida), Dinesh (Gurugram)